



# When Death Knocks on the School Doors

## The Stakeholder's In School

Consider for a moment the number of lives intertwined in a single school's community. The school staff and students are obvious share holders but others are connected as well through association. The parents, siblings and relatives tied to each student care what happens in the school building each and every day. Many staff members are spouses as well as parents. In addition to these job roles, they are also someone's son or daughter. A death experience for any of these individuals can trickle inside the school building, impacting staff and students.

"The percentage of students expected to experience the death of a par-

ent is expected to rise" (Willow House, 2009). This prediction is based on several changing social factors:

- \*Our population is aging.
- \*Women are waiting longer to have children.
- \*Older adults are remarrying and having a "second" family.
- \*A significant number of grandparents are raising their grandchildren.

In addition to parents, students are also more likely to experience the death of an educator as adults are remaining in their job role for longer periods of time and retiring later than in years past.

For these reasons, it is



*"Is your school's crisis intervention plan sufficient for any foreseeable event?"  
(American Hospice Foundation, 2009)*

strongly recommended that schools have a crises response plan in place. The student body, personnel and parents are three specific groups that will need individualized assistance. Every stakeholder in a school's community deserves a prompt, effective response and the best way to react positively is to be proactive in planning.

## Preparation is the Key

Not only must you plan for lessons, you must be ready for whatever a normal day may bring – even though "normal" may be characterized as hectic and challenging.

But what happens when the typical, demanding day arises to the level of a crisis? Are you pre-

pared? Is your school prepared? Will you be able to remain calm or will your response increase the anxiety? Will you nervously pace the floor or will you be able to reassure your students?

At any given time, a parent may approach your

classroom with the sad news that their spouse has died. A fellow colleague or staff member may fall ill in the hallway while your class is walking by. You may return to your classroom only to discover the class pet has died. What would you do?

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### Special points of interest:

- ♦ *When a normal day turns abnormal.*
- ♦ *Great books to help with grief.*
- ♦ *Preparing for difficult times.*
- ♦ *Grieving helps our body heal.*
- ♦ *Pets are family too!*
- ♦ *The importance of a crisis plan.*

## Preparation is the Key (continued)

The American Hospice Foundation as well as School-Based Crisis Intervention have recommended the following:

**Remain calm.** Sometimes it's easier to sit down. Reassure students and if needed, remove students from an emotional situation (upset parent, an ill colleague). It may help to have a teacher buddy to partner with.



*One day can change lives forever.*

**Listen.** Students may have questions. Answer carefully, making sure not to fuel rumors or add to the gossip mill. Your school counselor may send a statement of details to adhere to when discussing the event.

**Take time for yourself.** If a colleague has died or has been taken to the hospital, you need to voice your personal fears, thoughts and feelings. You may have a

routine for releasing stress like exercise or walking. If you feel you need to talk to someone, ask the school counselor for advice, turn to other colleagues or friends.

As an educator, you are concerned with the emotional well-being of your students. If you are calm and resolute, your students will likely be reassured.

## Favorite Book Picks

The following authors have simplified the explanation of death in a profound way, allowing educators to prompt healthy discussions regarding death and acceptance:

\**Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen – “No matter how long they are, or how short, lifetimes are really all the same. They have beginnings, and endings, and there is living in between.”

\**Always and Forever* by Alan Durant. “And in their hearts and their

Students often identify their own feelings in those of book characters.

memories, and their laughter, Fox was still there...always and forever.”

\**When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie Krasny Brown. “Someone dead may look asleep, but she isn't sleeping and she cannot wake up.”

\**The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia. This book uses the meta-

phor of leaves changing to resemble the changes in life.

\**Tear Soup* by Pat Schweibert.

\**Beat the Turtle Drum* by Constance Green.

Death is never easy but when we realize that death is part of life, it helps us remember the happy thoughts and memories so we may face the next day, month, or year with added strength and confidence.

## Preparing for Hard Days

Death is an inevitable part of living. The classroom can be a secure forum for discussing death utilizing excellent books that have been written concerning the variety of deep emotions inevitable when someone dies. Students identify with characters as they work through emotions like anger, denial, bargaining, intense mourning and sometimes depression. By asking students to

place themselves in the character's shoes, students are able to think about death objectively. When death does impact a student's life, he is more prepared for the barrage of emotions to come. She is able to recall characters and how they might have



*Everything that lives eventually dies.*

journeyed through the grieving process. When teachers introduce death with fiction and non-fiction works, students have a foundation of understanding they might not otherwise have.

## Grieving = Healing

When someone dies, the impact can be expansive. The individual may have been a primary support system. You may have had a special place or hobby that was done together, like fishing, eating at a favorite restaurant or discussing favorite books. A special habit may have been cultivated like meeting on certain days of the week or celebrating



*"It's OK to feel sad, mad, withdrawn or depressed for a while."  
(American Hospice Association, 2009)*

occasions in specific ways. "Grief is a basic, human process of dealing with the loss of 'what has been' and moving on to 'what will be'" (American Hospice Association, 2009). It's important to remember that grief does not look the same for everyone. The American Hospice Association recognizes several stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and

acceptance. These stages may co-exist or leave and return.

The process of grieving is not the same for everyone. Students often fear forgetting their loved one, thinking that acceptance is the equivalent of being dismissive. "You don't wipe away the memory of your loss. Acceptance is taking the gift of life and love with the one who has died, putting it in your heart and moving on with your life" (American Hospice Association, 2009).

## Pets Are Loved

For many students, a beloved pet lives in their home or in their yard. In fact, students are often brought up with their pet viewing it as a sibling, rather than an animal. The death of a pet should not be dismissed as it can be as devastating as the death of a family member. Allowing students to grieve the death of a pet helps them verbalize their memorial and aids in healing.

*I'll Always Love You* by Hans Wilhelm offers readers a frame of

reference when someone they love dies by respecting and giving closure to a pet's death.

*Mustard* by Charlotte Graeber tells of a family's sorrow after their pet cat dies.

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst is a book that has remained popular with both younger as well as older students. As students recall their top ten favorite memories of a pet, they are

*It's okay to be sad. It's okay to cry. It's okay to take the time needed to heal.*

reminded of the joy in having a pet's loyalty and companionship.

Students who have a pet that has run away often work through the same grieving process as they begin to realize the pet is unlikely to return.

## The Crisis Plan

If you are new to your school or district, become familiar with the school's crisis policy. School personnel should be able to identify the crisis, remove students from dangerous areas, understand the policy surrounding contacting the police or other emergency services, and have the capability to communicate the danger among the school community as advised (American Hos-

pice Foundation, 2009). Schools often have designated jobs for selected individuals, such as the school counselor, grade team leaders and the administrative team.

The school counselor is usually the person of



*"Crisis intervention and safety planning involves many layers of involvement."  
(American Hospice Association, 2009)*

reference for questions pertaining to crisis management. It is imperative to ask questions and understand individual campus plans prior to a crisis. A team that works together will succeed together.

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**April Q&A**

*I feel awkward when I comfort someone after a death. Any suggestions?*

The American Cancer Society has helped guide others with the same concerns. Here are some of their suggestions:

- \*Feel free to use the word "died" because you're acknowledging the profound loss. "I was saddened to learn that your \_\_\_ died."
- \*Use sincere honesty. "I don't know what to say; I'm here for you if you need me" or "I was disheartened to hear this happened to you."
- \*Offer your friendship and support. "What can I do for you?"
- \*Be silent. Sometimes it's best to give someone a hug and say nothing at all.
- \*Every individual and situation is unique. Never assume to "know" the feelings of another. More importantly, be careful not to minimize a death. "Everything will be alright" or "This time will pass."
- \*Individuals will have good days and bad days. Just "be there."
- \*The front-end of death is often easiest as there are numerous helpers around. Check in on holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other special dates as these can often be painful reminders of one's death.

**Resources:**

- American Cancer Society. "Helping Someone Who Is Grieving." [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MBC/content/MBC\\_4\\_1X\\_Helping\\_Someone\\_Who\\_Is-Bereaved.asp](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MBC/content/MBC_4_1X_Helping_Someone_Who_Is-Bereaved.asp) (accessed February, 2009).
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